JASMINE JAGGER

PLAYIN' POSSUM

A Review of *Young Eliot: From St Louis to The Waste Land*
By Robert Crawford
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> When you were a tiny boy, learning to talk, you used to sound the rhythm of sentences without shaping words – the ups and downs of the thing you were trying to say. I used to answer you in kind, saying nothing yet conversing with you as we sat side by side on the stairs at 2635 Locust Street.

These tender words, written to T. S. Eliot by his dying eldest sister, capture the early experiments of a child working his mouth around acoustic and muscular phenomena. Years later, in 1942, Eliot would discuss how "a poem, or a passage of a poem, may tend to realize itself first as a particular rhythm before it reaches expression in words, and that this rhythm may bring to birth the idea and the image." He would continue toying with sound shapes all his life: playing with voiceprints, adopting different mouthing masks. "Every poet should be something of a popular entertainer," he wrote, "able to think his own thoughts behind a tragic or comic mask."

Wearing masks was a lifelong habit of Eliot's, in poetry, prose and in person. As Crawford's new book relates, people found him "cold", mechanised, insensate. The Bloomsbury Group gossiped that he used "violet powder" to make himself look "cadaverous", while one reviewer described him as "Buried Alive". For Eliot, however, masks were integral to work and being; they were useful for shielding emotion and for making one's poetry difficult to read. He believed that art should be "impersonal":

> I like to feel that a writer is perfectly cool and detached, regarding other people's feelings or his own, like a God who has got beyond them; or a person who has dived very deep and comes up holding firmly some hitherto unseen submarine creature.

In contrast to the untrammelled "ups and downs" of Eliot the child, as an adult his speech was unforthcoming, and when spoken (or sung), it was careful, slow, stitched in: almost, at times, rehearsed:

> We grope together
> And avoid speech
> Gathered on this beach of the tumid river…
>
> (T. S. Eliot, 'The Hollow Men', 1925)

Taking such time over his words, it felt as though Eliot were diving down for them, palping them within his fingers, before coming back up for air.

For someone so eager to hide behind his work, a biography might seem unsuitable or even disrespectful. Eliot discouraged it while he was alive, as did his widow once he was dead. She had to "beg" him to allow her to publish the letters (or, the ones that are left, anyway); he broke, but outlined strict conditions. Robert Crawford's *Young Eliot* is the first volume of a two-part biography with permission to quote Eliot at length. His sequel, we are promised, will coincide with the release of 1,131 letters from Eliot to Emily Hale (his first love) between 1930 and 1957 that she has had legally bound and locked away in Princeton Library until "January 1st, 2020". Hale died three years after Eliot in 1968, but she probably intended to protect his widow from their release.

Born in 1888 into a wealthy family of straight-laced Unitarians, Thomas Stearns Eliot was nicknamed "Tom" and, Crawford tells us, so he will be addressed throughout. One might balk at the (over-) familiarity of this address, but it works: after all, Crawford's book is concerned with the formative years of Eliot the boy, teen, and young man *before* he became the prodigious poet of *The Waste Land*. "Tom", Crawford explains, was born with big ears: once, at his dancing class, a little girl leaned heavily across him to hiss at another "look at his ears!" – mortified, he went home and bound the protrusions to his head with string. He was also born with a congenital double hernia, and wore a truss for years. An awareness of this deformity arose at school when forbidden to play sport, and Crawford links this (unsubtly, but understandably) to the poet's sexual hesitancy in later years, when he suffered from "nervous sexual attacks".

Enjoyably, Crawford traces Eliot's early years in detail. In the evenings, Eliot's mother sang to him while the firelight made patterns on the ceiling. On family holidays in coastal New England he was drawn to the sea and its strange creatures. He hid away from his sisters' friends, "pale and thin and shy", and wrote little nonsenses for himself, publishing them in his own magazine, *Fireside*. Followed everywhere by the rhythms of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear, he developed an early love of parody, and Crawford locates respective sources for "Sweeney" and "Prufrock" in a local pedlar of remedies for male ailments, and a maker of parlour furniture. Focusing perceptively on Eliot's early relationships with words and 'things', Crawford illustrates how, from the beginning, these were important stimuli.

At school, it appears, Eliot's grades were bad; at university they were atrocious. As a young man he was both shy and pompous, yet Crawford skirts around his hero's negative traits each time they threaten to puncture his "sentimental" picture. That said, the biographer has no qualms about Eliot's obscene poems on "fucking", reproduced in all their glory just as they appeared to their audience of young Harvard bucks. At Harvard, Eliot's discovery of Baudelaire taught him "the possibility of fusion between the sordidly realistic and the phantasmagoric", while his readerly crush on the dead poet of "nerves", Jules Laforgue, taught him how to wring rhetoric like a wet dishtowel, squeeze the universe into a ball, and smile bitterly behind the mask:

Encore un de mes pierrots mort;
Mort d'un chronique orphelinisme;
C'était un coeur plein de dandysme
Lunaire, et un drôle de corps;

[Another of my pierrots is dead;
Dead from being chronically orphaned;
He had a head full of lunar
Dandyism, and a funny body;]

(Jules Laforgue, 'Locutions des Pierrots', XII [1902-3])

Laforgue's hat-in-hand love poetry inspired the first stirrings of 'Prufrock' which still survive in Eliot's *March Hare* notebook. Pulsing rhythmically between sound and sense, these early fragments make rich and strange moulds out of life. He wrote many of them while in Paris between 1910-11: in 'Rhapsody', we hear the poet wandering nocturnal streets, observing his surroundings:

Every street lamp that I pass
Beats like a fatalistic drum
And through the spaces of the dark
The midnight shakes my memory
As a madman shakes a dead geranium.

Crawford takes us through these scenes, allowing us to see through the poet's eyes. And his biography is, as a result, a cracking read. The mingling of Eliot's settings with his letters and his poetry is smoothly manoeuvred, and Crawford's readings are often astute, though occasionally over-simplified.

Crawford paints a strong picture of Eliot's personality through rich use of quotation. After moving to Oxford to resume his studies, for example, Eliot wrote: "[it] is very pretty, but I don't like to be dead". He stayed there for only a year, long enough to invent the word "bullshit" and meet Ezra Pound: "rather intelligent as a talker: his verse is well-meaning but touchingly incompetent". Over the course of this important friendship, Eliot would come to answer not just to "Tom", but to "Possum", "Caro Mio", and "bitch"; after he met his first wife, Vivienne, he would answer to "Wonkypenky". Crawford constellates the rest of his narrative around this fatal match, remaining faithful to Eliot's late remark that "to [Vivienne] the marriage brought no happiness. To me, it brought about the state of mind out of which came *The Waste Land*."

The biography puts paid to a number of baseless myths about Eliot the man, such as his homosexual tendencies towards Jean Verdenal. Instead, it follows the rapid spiral of the poet's early life from happiness to misery. The affair between Vivienne and Bertrand Russell is painstakingly and painfully brought to life: Vivienne emerges a manipulative, psychotic she-devil; "Bertie", a morally-foul, "weaselly" seducer. The magnetic Mrs. Eliot's bouts of infidelity and nervousness occur frequently and rampantly, and Crawford asserts that Eliot's own suffering developed directly out of this – despite the poet's own admittance in 1921 that his "*aboulie* [lack of will] and emotional derangement" had been "a life-long affliction".

It's a bit unfair on Vivienne that Crawford glosses over Eliot's "black moods" and "adulterous" (whatever that means) dependence on other women. Luckily, we are still given the Bloomsbury Groups's brittle, often uncanny, portraits of him. "Rather like a sculpted face," writes Virginia Woolf, "– no upper lip; formidable, powerful; pale. Then those hazel eyes seeming to escape the rest of him." Katherine Mansfield bitches: "That slow manner, that hesitation, side long glances and so on are *painful*." These descriptions, like biography, strain to recapture the *presence* of something – some *body*, long gone. Crawford's selection of photographs do this too: seizing hold of Eliot's shy and puckish expressions, catching at his gangly bearing, or congealing his discomfort while sitting beside his wife.

Eliot used poetry as an escape, Crawford writes. *The Waste Land* was a way of "transmuting personal sufferings into art" and hopefully "transcending them while fashioning something worthwhile out of the damage." Eliot's own words stray into the memory here: "Only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from those things"; and, more eerily, in a letter from 1925: "In the last ten years – gradually – but deliberately – I have made myself into a *machine*. I have done it deliberately – in order to endure, in order not to feel – *but it has killed V*." These lines themselves stutter and regurgitate like churned out, lifeless code. Their dovetailing with the publication of *The Waste Land* is telling: Eliot had built an armour for himself, and the plated poem he produced was a way of "PLAYIN' POSSUM", as Pound would say.

Despite appearances, Eliot's youth wasn't *all* gloom and doom. Woolf notes how he often "[laughed] out"; we know that he and Vivienne loved to sing and dance, and that they needed each other. These soft glimmers are, however, swallowed up by the darkness of Eliot's recurring breakdowns in the run up to *The Waste Land*. Later, the poet's response to his greatest poem was to underplay it: "To me it was the only relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life; it is just a piece of rhythmical grumbling". But Crawford brings out its "aching acoustic", its exudation of what Pound called "deformative secretions". It was only in the two poets' production of this poem that Pound finally got his friend "down to brass tacks" where previously Eliot had donned the mask. If creating *The Waste Land* dislodged Eliot's tongue on emotional matters, the poem is heard by Crawford as "a lasting cry, giving voice to a darkness deep in the human psyche" – a child's cry, almost; a cry that knows not from whence it came.

Woolf's depiction of Eliot reading this poem (with which Crawford concludes his book) takes us back to the child on the stairs physicalising expressive sounds:

> He sang it & chanted it, rhythmed it. It has great beauty & force; & tensity. What connects it together, I'm not so sure. But he read till he had to rush – letters to write about the London Magazine – & discussion was thus curtailed. One was left, however, with some strong emotion.

This prose almost captures Eliot's utterance – "letters to write" – as he shuffles away before questions are asked. Woolf also voices the impression left on all readers of the poem: "What connects it together, I'm not so sure". Yet, from those pre-linguistic rhythmical experiments as a shy, big-eared boy, Eliot clung to that

sense of language as an attempt "to express the inexpressible by expressing the impossibility of expression": "the ups and downs of the thing you were trying to say".

Crawford gets behind the mask. To rob Eliot's story of its deep unhappiness, he says, would be to "caricature him". In fact, as is shown, Eliot was "not marmoreal, but wounded and sometimes wounding […] imposingly erudite" but also "conflictedly human". After her husband's death, Valerie Eliot devoted the rest of her life to unearthing the legacy of this great poet. With all that she has achieved, with Ron Schuchard's *Complete Prose* project on the horizon, and the impending release of Emily Hale's letters, maybe it's a good time to start looking more deeply at Eliot, as a living, breathing human being. Crawford's biography is a first step in that direction.